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A place to grow older... alone? Living and ageing as a single older lifestyle migrant in the Azores

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Introduction

International retirement migration has been typically studied as a couple's project (King et al., 2000; O'Reilly, 2000). This approach has, however, often overlooked the fast-increasing diversity in older age and later-life lifestyles (cf. Daatland and Biggs, 2004; Warnes et al., 2004). Indeed, very little is known about single lifestyle migrants migrating in later-life or at a younger age and staying put, even in the context of separation or the loss of a spouse. Important exceptions include the works of Ahmed and Hall (2016) and Trundle (2014) – the first on (vulnerable) older British migrants in Spain, and the second on Anglo-American women in Tuscany, some of them in retirement age and separated.

Ageing abroad as a single migrant may encompass distinct life trajectories: the lifelong single person; the person who was married or partnered, became divorced, separated, or bereaved, and then moved abroad; and the migrating couple, with the remaining spouse staying on after separation or bereavement. What are the expectations and reasoning behind single lifestyle migrants' choice of remaining abroad in later-life? How do these migrants experience place and what meanings does place hold for them? And how are these experiences shaped by gender? These are the questions guiding this paper which

develops around two closely linked themes – *freedom, individuality, and being alone*; and *romantic partnership, death and its negotiations*.

The theoretical discussion is centrally focused on the work of Giddens (1991) and Massey (1994), but also draws on other relevant literature. My concerns resonate with Andrews and Phillips' (2005) quest to further map out the manifold influences that place and older people exert on each other; but I also seek to offer a novel perspective by looking at single international retirement migrants. Building upon migrants' first-hand accounts, specifically four sample narratives (portrayals), I put into perspective traditional assumptions that regard single older lifestyle migrants abroad as vulnerable or dependent and therefore more likely to return imminently to their countries of origin. In doing so, I highlight the complex, yet often oversimplified, set of needs, desires and expectations that characterise later-life. Specifically, I seek to illuminate the largely neglected narratives of loss and romantic partnership in older age, and challenge presumptions about older people as 'desensualised' or shorn of desire for intimacy (cf. Segal, 2013).

The paper is in three parts. I start by reviewing and fleshing out intersections in the literatures on the (ageing) self, lifestyle and place. I then move on to introduce the case of the Azores as a valuable, yet largely overlooked, research setting for the study of international retirement migration, and then to outline the data and methods used. The third section, the longest, constitutes the empirical discussion. I conclude with a summary of the main findings.

Ageing, lifestyle and place: crossings and intersections

In a context of time-space compression, and ever-increasing mobility and cultural intermingling, can we rethink and redefine our sense of place and our sense of identity across space and over the life course? How does geographical mobility shape our possibilities for self-actualisation and happiness in later-life? In this section, I seek to explore the intersections between the ageing self, lifestyle migration, and place.

For lifestyle migrants, geographical relocation often holds a prospect for freedom and starting afresh in a new geographical and emotional setting. Starting over in a new place offers the opportunity of being ‘anonymous’ again and breaking free from the shackles of the past (Korpela, 2014). The feeling of regaining a sense of control over one’s life and the very notion of ‘me time’ can be inextricably linked to individuals’ self-realisation and life satisfaction (Hoey, 2010; Oliver, 2008). For Giddens (1991, 78), self-actualisation is ‘a balance between opportunity and risk’ and a life strategy in which freedom and security and their relations to place are pondered throughout the life course. This permanent re-negotiation can be related to transitional passages, life-changing events, or, according to Giddens, ‘fateful moments’ (e.g. transition to retirement or the loss of a spouse).

Attachment to place often plays a central role in one’s sense of security, protection and rootedness. This is especially the case for older migrants, for whom belonging to a community is perceived as an anchor for individual wellbeing and sense of continuity, even in face of change. As Massey (1994, 151) remarks: ‘there is the need to face up to – rather than simply deny – people’s need for attachment of some sort, whether through place or anything else’. Hoey (2010, 246), likewise, highlights that ‘lifestyle migrants express a need to go to a place in which they feel they have or can make lasting, tangible,

even transcendent attachment'. While there is a need to uproot oneself from previous constraining life circumstances, there is also a quest for re-grounding oneself through familiarity with space and 'its character', both through the place itself and through linkages to places beyond. This is visible, for instance, in the search for the 'rural idyll', the 'off-grid', or an emplaced sense of respect for the elderly which is perceived as having been lost in the urban, industrialised countries where lifestyle migrants are typically from (cf. Benson, 2011; Vannini and Taggart, 2014). For older lifestyle migrants, especially so when on their own, ageing abroad holds the promise of profoundly shaping, for the better, how later-life can be *lived, felt* and *experienced*.

Lifestyle choices and the virtually infinite ability to choose can be as liberating as daunting. The balance between freedom, security and risk is then a fickle equilibrium that lifestyle migrants seek to maintain. While freedom and risk-taking are perceived as youthful attributes, later-life migrants feel a growing desire for a certain sense of material and emotional security. As Giddens (1991, 73) aptly puts it: 'taking charge of one's life involves risk, because it means confronting a diversity of open possibilities'. For single older lifestyle migrants, the idea of 'taking risk' is rooted not only in their 'choice for the individual' but also in the resulting renegotiations of living and ageing abroad as a single person. This draws attention to the importance of shifts in lifespan developments and resulting re-adjustments over the life course (Trundle, 2014). The quest for self-determination or even seclusion in later-life and the desire for a 'sensual appreciation of life' or a sense of 'erotic agency' (Lulle and King, 2016, 448; Sheller, 2012, 244-245) are not necessarily (if ever) conflictual. Far from universal, these life choices, and the aspirations they embody, are deeply shaped by age, gender, or social location (see e.g. Warnes et al. 2004; Croucher, 2013; Atkinson, 2008 respectively). The ability to

geographically stretch-out social relations and develop a variety of forms of transnationalism which help in coping with being alone in a foreign country or deal with the loss of a partner are undeniably wrought by relative privilege. And yet, feelings of space and place are a complex phenomenon that necessarily goes beyond the economic dimension – ‘there is a lot more determining how we experience space than what “capital” gets up to’ (Massey, 1994, 148).

Place is *felt, lived, experienced* and *embodied* differently in life – alone or in a couple/family – and in death. Attachments to place are regularly reassessed, especially when fundamental life changes, such as the death of a spouse, or partner, take place. Reactions can be dual: either migrants experience loneliness and a lack of emotional and social support, thus relocating to their home country or close to family (Ahmed and Hall, 2016); or they may perceive staying abroad as an open statement of their independence and life enjoyment through later-life (Oliver, 2008). While return is perceived as a throwback, ageing abroad, on the other hand, reflects, in the latter case, a strong identification with place and an adventurous outlook to life. Much is to be *lived* before death, as I shall show in the following sections.

Context and methods: researching lifestyle migration in the Azores

Islands tend to be portrayed (even mythicised) as places of escape and idyll. For lifestyle migrants, islands offer serenity and quiet. Islands come out, then, as ‘little disconnected safe-haven[s]’ (Vannini and Taggart, 2014, 192), where one can start afresh and lead a more spontaneous and unhurried lifestyle. As Lowenthal (2007, 203) evocatively remarks: ‘today’s lust for islands is unmatched in scope and avidity’.

Following a centuries-long history of emigration, the late 1990s-early 2000s brought about a migration turn to the Azores which became an attractive location – for both its geographical seclusion yet easy access to Europe and North America – to growing numbers of lifestyle migrants. The steady economic growth of the Portuguese islands, part of the European Union since 1986, and the growing appeal of the archipelago as a tourism destination were decisive factors in its emergence as a lifestyle migration destination.

Lifestyle migrants to the Azores are mostly middle and older-aged adults, mainly from North-West Europe (especially Germany and Great Britain) followed by North America (SEFSTAT, 2015). Nationals from EU-27 countries display an older profile, with almost half aged 50 years old or more. Among these, the Germans and the British typically show a more mature profile. Similar results, including a slight predominance of women, have been observed by Rocha et al. (2011) in one of the very few studies addressing, at least partially, the phenomenon of lifestyle migration in the Azores.

These migrants tend to hold island imaginaries that can be tied to a post-materialist escapism and the search for more ‘alternative’ lifeways materialised in ideas about re-bonding with nature, simplicity and authenticity (cf. Vannini and Taggart, 2014). For the research participants, relocating to the Azores is linked to broader ideas of ‘lush nature’, ‘safety’, ‘remoteness’ and ‘local friendliness’. For most, the Azores ended up being a destination somewhat by chance – either by searching for more ‘off-grid’ destinations in Europe, by randomly anchoring in the Azores while sailing between Europe and North America, or through visiting friends.

The discussion presented in this paper is drawn from a set of 36 in-depth life narrative interviews with later-life lifestyle migrants aged 50 years old or more, and living in the

Azores¹. These are part of a recently completed doctoral research project on later-life migration which also included interviews with return and labour migrants (108 interviews in total). The interviews were conducted between June and December 2014 in both urban and rural settings in the four most populated Azores islands – São Miguel, Terceira, Faial and Pico. They were carried out in a way that elicited participants' life stories and experiences, recognising that storytelling is a valuable methodological tool within geographical research (Cameron, 2012), one that offers 'unique glimpses of the lived interior of migration processes' (Benmayor and Skotnes, 1994, 14).

The participants were selected through a combination of methods which assured the diversity of the sample – facilitated by locally-based associations, and through my own network of contacts and snowballing. In the interviews, I adopted a 'free-flowing' approach, letting the interviewees guide their own narratives; as a backdrop, I had a set of questions I sought to cover in each interview in order to allow later comparative analysis. The interviews, mostly carried out at the migrants' homes, were supplemented by fieldnotes, participant observation, and other visual materials such as photographs. The interviews were subsequently transcribed and analysed following a dialectic exchange between the data collected and supporting theories. The migrants interviewed were mostly from Germany, England and the Netherlands. The 36 participants comprised single women (the majority), single men, and couples; they were mostly aged in their 50s, 60s and 70s, full-time residents in the Azores for about 10 to 15 years, and (pre-)retired. The large majority of the participants had professional or managerial jobs when active, thus representing a comfortable middle class. Those who had not yet retired were engaged in tourism-related and creative activities (e.g. painting and pottery) in the Azores.

Four portrayals, purposefully selected as aptly showcasing the variety of pathways to single lifestyle migration, guide the following empirical section. These are thematically rich and very personal accounts that expose core aspects of negotiating singleness in later-life. The portrayals selected do not seek to be representative of the reality of the majority of my participants; rather, they aim to illustrate an important and evolving trend in (later-life) lifestyle migration, yet one still majorly overlooked.

Living and ageing as a single lifestyle migrant in the Azores: portrayals and main themes

Two main themes and four portrayals make up the following discussion. Flip, Carrie, Sabine and Tobias² – in their 60s and early 70s and in the Azores for at least a decade – aptly convey the ethos of individuality, freedom and choice present in other narratives. While Carrie and Tobias moved to the Azores with their spouses, who have subsequently passed away, Flip and Sabine moved to the Azores on their own. These migrants have in common the quest for new life adventures, freedom from the normativity of their previous lives, and the possibility of re-bonding with the self (and others) and starting afresh.

Freedom, individuality, and being alone

Flip's experience of migration to the Azores represents, in his words, 'a new life with new possibilities'. As in other geographical contexts – for instance the Spanish *Costas*

(O'Reilly, 2000), rural France (Benson, 2011) or India (Korpela, 2014) – moving abroad is perceived as a step to freedom and an opportunity to redefine, even reinvent, oneself.

I had little time to prepare this sailboat, but it went well and by June I said 'bye, bye' [he laughs] ... and then I started a new life, with new possibilities, and the bad things stayed there... [in the context of splitting up with his ex-partner]. (Flip, early 60s, originally from the Netherlands)

The ethos of freedom and the possibility of liberating oneself from the constraining environments of the past are central to the lives and self-narratives of single lifestyle migrants in the Azores. In these cases, place emerges almost as a 'rebirthing site'. Echoing this redemptive approach to later-life, Carrie shares her profound life transition following the death of her husband, after which she embarked on a process of 'self-discovery' and 're-bonding with the self'. She describes her shifting process from an *estrangeiro* ('expat') group of friends to a much greater interaction with the Azorean people through engagement in local activities and *festas* (festivities). Carrie's experience can be tied to that of British retirement migrants in Spain in that 'breaking free' from an expat social net is perceived (and experienced) as a liberating and a stimulating new discovery (cf. Oliver, 2008). As Korpela (2014, 30) pertinently remarks, this is 'a question not only of mirroring the self against the 'others' but of constructing a self "on its own"'. For Carrie, being on her own in later-life, rather than loneliness, signified the chance to re-gain control over her time and schedule and free herself from socially expected roles:

It's really fun to be... this is the first time in my life ever that I don't have a husband, I don't have 'a house', I don't have a job, I don't have children around, and I just... I have no schedule. Like this morning, I was up at 5.30am but for instance when

Isabel [Carrie's maid] wants to make an appointment, I don't like it to be early because what if I don't want to rush, or if I want to just do something before that... I often sleep in three different shifts for a night. I eat a meal or five meals in a day. I do nothing that's according to what you are expected to do. (Carrie, late 60s, originally from the United States)

The same ideals of independence and liberty are evident in Flip's account below. Carrie and Flip's narratives remind us that assumptions about wellbeing and happiness as tied to ideas of keeping a busy, and implicitly fulfilling, social life should not go unchallenged. Instead, privacy, quietness, and 'me time' may be good pointers of self-enjoyment in later-life.

Sometimes friends also want to come along [on his sailboat], but I don't want it. I want to be alone, please. Wander around alone. Trips between islands, that isn't a problem, but longer trips, yes. I prefer to be alone. That's what my boat [his home] is prepared for (figure 1).

<< Figure 1 about here >>

For lifestyle migrants, individuality and freedom are not only present-time achievements, they are part of a desired lifestyle for the future. Sabine's narrative excerpt, below, reveals her understandings of later-life as fluid and unbounded while it also seems to hold a certain wishful thinking and 'hopeful performativity' that the future will be self-reliant and adventurous. This challenges conventional assumptions of later-life as sedentary, and shows how freedom can be symbolically expressed through the absence

of exact planning for the future; or, echoing Flip's chosen lifestyle, a sense of 'going where the wind blows you'. In Sabine's words, there is a sense of liberty that is both fluid yet to some extent subject to plan:

In 10 years, I will leave this place. Not now. I will sit in a train and go around Europe. The train will be my house. That will be another experiment. What is Europe? I would like to experience it by train, from the north to the south, to discover Europe. Reading in the train. Yes! But I will come back. My friends will live here. I won't sell this house. (Sabine, mid-60s, originally from the Netherlands)

Yet, with freedom comes risk, as we are told by Ulrich Beck (1999) who reminds us that increased freedom means decreased security, especially, I would argue, in later-life migration when negotiations need to consider not only the experience of living in a foreign country but also the limitations that come with age. While lifestyle migrants seek liberty, they also yearn for some sense of security, a physical and emotional place where they can root their own 'soils of significance' (Hoffman, 1989, 278). This ambivalent desire for freedom and security is clear, for instance, in Carrie's reflection on the advantages of living in the Azores, especially as an older woman:

This is a really great place to live as an older person because there is very little age discrimination here socially, compared to the United States (...) It's also very safe here for being an older person, especially women, and that's a very, very big important thing for me. I don't worry about leaving the city at 2 or 3 o'clock in the night and walking to my car by myself. There are very few places in the United States where I would do that. So that's a really important reason for my staying: the whole thing of 'no fear'.

Security is also a common theme in the section that follows, with single lifestyle migrants seeking some sense of romantic intimacy and sensual appreciation in later-life. The ambivalent desire for anchorage but also for 'living loose' comes out plainly in my participants' reflections on romance and bereavement.

Romantic partnership, death and its negotiations

For a single lifestyle migrant such as Sabine, the freedom she found in the Azores has challenged more customary notions of romantic relationships. Despite acknowledging the many life possibilities found in the Azores, Sabine also reveals, throughout her narrative, a certain desire for intimacy and companionship, often complicated by cultural differences:

I tried to find a man here, but it wasn't a success... I was in a relationship three times, as a secret, otherwise you have to meet the family, and that is too much. You see, that is the only moment I am absolutely different. The culture difference, it doesn't work. They were from here. They didn't understand me. Because of that it was impossible. They were a bit younger, and I wasn't married, I was a free woman.

[...]

A woman who lives alone is not very popular. People live in couples, in all societies. Although less and less so. I met a man, he is very funny. Finally, there was this man. I love to dance... not Portuguese music. I forget everything and I dance. This man

danced a lot. We danced together. Next day, I thought I was too wild, but it happened.

He is old and fat. It is too much for me. I am not interested anymore.

Sabine's quote echoes a quest for bodily and emotional re-bonding with others which can be understood with reference to the liberatory power of her own 'erotic agency' (cf. Sheller, 2012), and the 'time-spaces of possibility' (or hindrance) unleashed by the migration experience (cf. Lulle and King, 2016).

One of the most life-changing events in later-life is the loss of a partner. The shared sense of freedom experienced abroad as a couple and the sudden shift to a life as a single individual may prove especially challenging in later-life. Tobias, below, gives a rather intimate and symbolic account of life after the death of his spouse. By remaining in the Azores after his wife passed away, Tobias seeks emotional closure and physical togetherness (Gardner, 2002) until he is finally reunited with her in the same *campa* [grave]. The burial place reveals attachments to the locality and the people, and the importance attributed to being closer to the remains emerges as a way of 'continuing bond after death' (Oliver, 2004, 244).

Nobody thinks that your partner will die. Being old... the time comes. I think that possibly I will die here. But I don't want to die. I stay here, but I don't want to. The first months after the death of your partner... I was busy... bureaucracies... but I cried. The dog makes noise, otherwise there is silence. I am not going back to Austria. She is here on the island and I am here. I will be in that *campa* as well. (Tobias, early 70s, originally from Austria)

Interestingly, Tobias' reaction to the loss of his partner is rather different to that of Carrie. While for Tobias there is an emotional and physical devotion to his deceased wife, Carrie

experienced her husband's passing with a mix of pain and 'opportunity' to start over again:

I was 19 when I started living with my husband so to go for like 40 years as part of a couple to alone involves a lot of... I was never an adult before by myself. I thought I would be lonely, but I'm not. I thought I would have nothing to do, just kind of sitting around in the house, but I'm not (...) I still get very sad sometimes when I'm in places that are full of old memories and I avoid things that are painful.

The age difference at the time of the spouse's death – late 50s for Carrie and mid-60s for Tobias – help illustrate, at least partially, the nuanced ways in which death and loss are experienced in an ageing and migration context, and the consequent coping strategies as a single individual (cf. Ahmed and Hall, 2016).

Conclusion

In this article, I have shown how under post-modern conditions the ethos of freedom and individualism has spread across the life course becoming a central element in single older lifestyle migrants' narratives of self-actualisation. Across the life span, and especially in later-life, increasing attention is drawn to the self, its needs, and its choices – this is clear in my participants' extensive reflections on their desire for intimacy and feelings of loss. This paper aspires to be an original contribution to the still limited research on single international retirement migrants; and a relevant contribution to help demystify ideas of 'erotic invisibility' in older age (Segal, 2013, 26), making a clear statement about the need for romantic intimacy in later-life, as in any other stage of the life course.

The emplaced living and ageing experiences of these migrants emerge as ambiguously mixed, even dichotomous. Whilst the place offers a multitude of practical and emotional advantages – feelings of protection, rootedness and sense of belonging to a community – it can also generate intermittent feelings of loneliness, including the desire to restore some sense of companionship, intimacy and romantic life. For single older lifestyle migrants, the relatively secluded and peaceful setting of the Azores provides them with a comforting imaginary of the islands as ‘safe ports’ or ‘places of anchorage’. The Azores also holds a certain mystique as ‘liberating’ and ‘off-grid’, a place where one can get away from the social and personal constraints of the past and be able to embody a ‘new persona’. For lifestyle migrants, especially those on their own, individuality and freedom are not only present-time achievements but rather part of a chosen, idealised lifestyle. Ageing, later-life, and the upcoming years are, purposely I suggest, described in a fuzzy and unbounded manner, to show the many possibilities that life still holds.

Through the narrative lens of single older lifestyle migrants, this paper has sought to further problematise conventional assumptions of later-life as vulnerable, sedentary or ‘desensualised’. The findings reinforce studies that have started unpacking later-life as ‘the new spring years’ rather than a necessarily destitute period of life (King et al., 2017; Lulle and King, 2016). And yet, we should not risk an over-celebratory narrative of freedom and choice over the life course. For these migrants, as for those in other studies, the temporal dimensions of ageing are crucial to understand change over the lifespan. Indeed, as Ahmed and Hall (2016, 112) remark, exercising freedom and autonomy later in life is not always possible and, further down the line, migrants are often ‘no longer agents in their own lives’. Future work is needed on the role of age, gender, class, ethnicity and other dimensions in shaping ageing imaginaries, aspirations, and

experiences of later-life. We must not forget that, while for some ageing independently abroad is a life choice and a lifestyle, for others it is an imposition or a fate.

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¹ For a broader discussion of age categories and the challenges in defining ‘old age’ see e.g. Bytheway (2005).

For studies adopting a similar age threshold in the study of ageing and migration see e.g. Casado-Díaz et al. (2004) or Lulle and King (2016).

² All names have been changed to preserve the anonymity of the participants.